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Years ago, reactionary forces began to reconnect. On the emergence of the transatlantic extreme right



"An excellent speech!" Alice Weidel, federal spokesperson for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and then her party's candidate for chancellor, expressed her enthusiasm on February 14 on Platform X for the speech US Vice President JD Vance had just given at the Munich Security Conference. The multimillionaire had vehemently railed against the conditions in the EU, claiming that the worst of the "pressing challenges" of the present was neither rampant poverty nor the escalating threat of war, but "mass migration." He then complained that "conservatives"—in fact, he was referring to people on the far right—were subjected to harsh repression in Europe. With Europe's extreme right-wing parties directly in his sights, he now demanded that there should be "no room for firewalls" on the continent. This meant: a clear path for parties like the AfD to participate in government. And to top it all off, Vance personally received Weidel for a half-hour discussion following his speech.

In his Munich speech, Vance celebrated the Trump administration's support for the far right in Germany and other European countries more openly and crudely than ever before in front

of the global elite. He thus sent right-wingers like Weidel into a frenzy of euphoria: explicit backing from the number two in the United States, no less, in the final stages of an election campaign – who else gets that? For many non-right-wingers, however, the speech was a shock, an event hardly anyone had expected. It should be noted, however, that even if the support for Europe's far right was unexpected in such unambiguousness, it is by no means new. Individuals and organizations politically somewhat close to US President Donald Trump have been busy for years building relationships with Europe – with Great Britain, Hungary, and Germany. What is emerging is a new form of transatlantic relations: a transatlantic far right.

Bannon's network

Steve Bannon was the first to take the lead in 2012, shortly after he took over as head of the US online platform *Breitbart News*, which he described as a "platform for the alt-right," a current of the extreme right in the US. In 2012, Bannon invited Nigel Farage, then chairman of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), to a series of meetings with various other US right-wing figures in New York and Washington. The two remained in contact. In 2013, Bannon began thinking about expanding the reach of his platform and discussed plans to establish a branch in Great Britain with UKIP Secretary General Matthew Richardson, who managed UKIP's relations with the US. In February 2014, he announced that *Breitbart London* would soon be operational, calling the British capital a new "front in our current cultural and political war." And indeed, *Breitbart London* soon began to extend the US portal's hate speech to the United Kingdom – and in doing so, loudly drummed up support for UKIP and Britain's exit from the EU.

It might be worth mentioning that *Breitbart News* was primarily funded by Robert Mercer, a US hedge fund manager who became the main financier of Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign. Billionaire Mercer also supported his longtime friend Farage in the fight for Brexit, which ultimately won a majority in the referendum on June 23, 2016—a disastrous blow for the EU. Bannon disliked the Union as much as Mercer did, and this worried many on the European continent when Bannon, reportedly on Mercer's recommendation, rose first to become Trump's campaign manager in 2016 and then, on January 20, 2017, to become the new US president's chief advisor. "Bannon hates the EU," confirmed one of his former *Breitbart* colleagues in March 2017: "He sees it primarily as an instrument of globalism." In February 2017, Bannon went on the offensive, telling the German ambassador in Washington that he considered the EU a misconstruction. Just a short time earlier, in

November 2016, *Breitbart News* had announced that it was in the process of establishing branches in Germany and France—the next step in advancing the "cultural and political war." Ultimately, however, nothing came of it.

Bannon returned to work on expanding into Europe after being fired by Trump on August 18, 2017, and then finally removed from his *Breitbart* position by Mercer on January 9, 2018. On March 1, 2018, he arrived in Rome to support Matteo Salvini's Lega party shortly before the Italian parliamentary elections on March 4. On March 6, he appeared in Zurich at an event hosted by the weekly newspaper *Die Weltwoche*, whose owner, Roger Köppel, was a member of the Swiss National Council for the Swiss People's Party (SVP). On March 10, he gave a speech in Lille at the party conference of Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN, now Rassemblement National/RN). In the second half of May, Bannon was back in Europe, appearing on May 23 at the conference "The Future of Europe" in Budapest, which was held with the official support of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. There, he met Viktor Orbán for the first time: "A Trump before there was Trump," he praised. Bannon systematically weaved his networks.

Shortly thereafter, on June 3, 2018, Richard Grenell, who had served as US Ambassador to Berlin for barely four weeks, spoke out in an interview with *Breitbart London*. "I absolutely want to empower other conservatives across Europe," he explained: "I think a fundamental current of conservative politics is taking root there because of the misguided policies of the left." Shortly thereafter, he wrote on Twitter about the awakening of a "silent majority" that rejects "the elites and their bubble"; their figurehead is Donald Trump. Years later, Grenell once reported that he deeply regretted that he had not been allowed to meet with AfD politicians during his time as ambassador in Berlin, as internal diplomatic rules had not permitted it. However, his expressions of sympathy on *Breitbart* and Twitter were very closely observed. At least he was able to meet with Health Minister Jens Spahn (CDU), with whom he reportedly became friends at the time. Spahn, in turn, had spent his Easter vacation in the United States just over a year earlier and visited Bannon on that occasion. He was thrilled, *Der Spiegel* reported shortly afterwards.

Bannon's European activities intensified when he was in London in July 2018 – parallel to Trump's visit to the UK at the time. He again met with leading figures of the far right in Europe, including Kent Ekeröth of the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) and Filip Dewinter of the Belgian Vlaams Belang. Above all, however, he set about creating structures. An organization called "The Movement," based in Brussels, was to become a kind of think tank that would conduct polls, produce analyses, and, based on these, offer advice to far-right

parties, ultimately making them the strongest force in the European Parliament. Bannon envisioned a kind of right-wing counter-model to George Soros's "Open Society Foundation." He also pursued a plan to establish an academy in the medieval Trisulti Monastery, located about 100 kilometers southeast of Rome, where future leaders of extreme right-wing organizations would learn their trade. Both projects ultimately failed – the first due to the unwillingness of Europe's extreme right to be coordinated by an American; the second due to disinterest and disgruntled resistance from the local population.

One more thing remains: Bannon had already established direct contact with the AfD at that time. At the beginning of March 2018, he met with Alice Weidel, then co-chair of the AfD parliamentary group, and Beatrix von Storch, a member of the Bundestag, in Zurich. "Fantastic personalities," he praised them afterward, "so clever," so "well-articulated" – what else can you say when you want to build something with what you find? He was certain, he finally stated, "that over time they will be able to appeal to the middle class and introduce populism and nationalism to a young audience." He was unfortunately right. What was almost equally important: a first step toward opening the AfD to closer transatlantic involvement had been taken. She considered Bannon "a very well-informed and analytically strong mind," praised Weidel, "from whom one can learn a lot." Even if it is only that, in foreign policy, there are alternatives for forces like the AfD to a focus on Russia.

Worldwide contacts

The next attempt to connect the far right in Europe with US Trumpism was made by the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Founded in 1974 by the American Conservative Union (ACU), it holds an annual networking event that evolved in the 2000s from a small-scale event to a mass gathering, often referred to as a "Woodstock for conservatives" with thousands of participants. At the same time, it became increasingly dominated by the ultra-right wing of the US Republican Party. Since 2011, it has been associated with the name Donald Trump. The billionaire, who had not yet distinguished himself as a politician, made his first appearance at CPAC and was met with enthusiastic approval for his claim that foreign states were unashamedly exploiting the US. If he ever decides to become president, he continued, "our country will be great again." The tone is familiar today. Some consider Trump's 2011 CPAC appearance to be the true beginning of his political career. By the time he first took office in 2017, CPAC had completely aligned itself with his political line, and it has remained so ever since.

In 2017, the organizers of CPAC began expanding their format to selected countries in the – politically speaking – Western world. The goal was to create strong ties to the respective national right and at the same time to mobilize them. It began in December 2017 with CPAC Japan, which has been held regularly since then. In addition to politicians from the hard right wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), politicians from Taiwan have also been guests there. In 2019, an anti-Beijing activist from Hong Kong was invited to CPAC Japan, although the Chinese authorities prevented his departure. In 2019, as in Japan, in the presence of numerous US Republicans and figures like Bannon, further CPACs were held in South Korea, Australia and Brazil, the latter in cooperation with Eduardo Bolsonaro, the son and quasi-US foreign minister of then-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. In 2022, CPACs were added in Mexico and Israel, and in 2024, CPAC Argentina, which focused heavily on the country's new president, Javier Milei. Among those present were Lara Trump, daughter-in-law of the then president-elect, and—via video message—Steve Bannon.

With Orbán's help

In 2022, CPAC Hungary was held for the first time, and has been held annually since then, bringing together politicians and activists from the far right in Europe with US Trumpists and right-wingers from other continents. Recent years have featured figures such as Jordan Bardella (RN), Herbert Kickl (FPÖ) and Roger Köppel (SVP), Gerolf Annemans (Vlaams Belang), Geert Wilders (PVV), and Santiago Abascal (Vox). In 2024, the hosts proudly welcomed three former prime ministers – Tony Abbott of Australia, Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland, Janez Janša of Slovenia – as well as seven current ministers – five from Hungary, two from Israel – and even two current prime ministers, Viktor Orbán and Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgia. Among the 3,000 or so participants, it was reported that almost 500 foreign guests were among them. As in 2023, there was a video message from Donald Trump himself. Eduardo Bolsonaro has also appeared at CPAC Hungary in the past. This year, the event will take place in Budapest on May 29 and 30.

The fact that CPAC chose the Hungarian capital as the location for its European branch is due—how could it be otherwise—to Viktor Orbán. He boasts good relations with Trump and was already involved when Bannon launched his first attempt to connect Europe to the US right in 2018. The reactionary turn he has given the Hungarian state since taking office as prime minister in 2010 has had consequences: A network of right-wing organizations and institutions has long since emerged in Budapest, which, fueled in part by state funds, not only shape the political climate in Hungary but also extend abroad.

In Hungary, for example, the quarterly magazines *The European Conservative* and, since 2021, *The Hungarian Conservative* are published . Both are published in English, with authors ranging from national conservatives to the far right, and are aimed at an international audience. Financial support comes from the state—indirectly via foundations. Close ties to the US right exist, personified, for example, by Rod Dreher—a longtime contributor to *The American Conservative* , who moved to Budapest in 2022 and now writes for *The European* and *The Hungarian Conservative* . In 2023, he enthusiastically reported on Orbán's CPAC speech for *The Hungarian Conservative* .

Heritage Foundation

The relationships are close-knit. Dreher is, among other things, a visiting fellow at the Budapest-based Danube Institute, which was founded in 2013 to foster a broad intellectual exchange with intellectuals, initially from other Central European countries, but later also "with the English-speaking world," as it states itself. In doing so, it sees itself as committed to "a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy." One of its four current partner organizations is the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, one of the most influential right-wing think tanks in the US establishment. Last year, as part of its "Project 2025," it developed concepts and strategies for a second Trump presidency—as hoped at the time—which the president has since built upon. Kevin Roberts, President of the Heritage Foundation, had already received Orbán in Washington in November 2022 and highly praised Hungary's political development under his leadership. When a delegation from Patriots for Europe (PfE) was in Washington during Trump's inauguration on January 20th – the PfE group in the European Parliament includes, among others, the RN, the FPÖ, the Italian Lega and Orbán's Fidesz – they were also received at the Heritage Foundation.

The Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, has adopted a Trump-oriented stance since Roberts took office in December 2021. It is now also increasingly active in Europe. On February 7, 2025, for example, Roberts met with leading representatives of PfE member parties on the sidelines of the PfE General Assembly in Madrid. On February 21, at a meeting of the ultra-conservative Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC) in London, he called for closer cooperation between right-wing organizations, including across the Atlantic, according to a report by the web portal *Desmog* .

On March 11, members of the Heritage Foundation debated a paper jointly authored by the MCC and Ordo Iuris with representatives of the Hungarian Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), which is close to Orbán, and the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture, which is close

to Kaczyński's Polish PiS party. It proposes a restructuring of the EU. The powers of nation states are to be strengthened, the powers of the Brussels-based apparatus reduced, and bureaucracy reduced, similar to what Elon Musk is doing with his special authority DOGE in the US. The transformation is intended to culminate in a European Community of Nations (ECN). This likely corresponds to the Heritage Foundation's goals. Domestically, the Europe the three organizations are striving for is likely adequately described by the names Orbán and Kaczyński.

New AfD orientation

Against this backdrop, it is not at all surprising that Elon Musk posted on X on December 20, 2024, "Only the AfD can save Germany," that on December 28, he wrote in *Welt am Sonntag* that the AfD was "the last spark of hope for this country," that on January 9, 2025, he conducted a promotional interview with AfD chancellor candidate Alice Weidel on X, and that he finally joined the AfD election campaign launch in Halle via video on January 25. US Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference, his demonstrative conversation with Weidel – all of this fits perfectly with the political course taken by Bannon in 2017 and Grenell in 2018, which CPAC adopted in 2022, and which the Heritage Foundation is now following. The aim is apparently to destroy the EU in its current form and, as one can conclude from the debates at the Heritage Foundation, to replace it with a model that has been discussed for decades under the slogan "Europe of Nations".

It should be noted, however, that Musk, Vance, and Trump's "crypto czar" David Sacks come from the Silicon Valley tech scene, where national conservative or other classic right-wing ideologies, such as Bannon's or CPAC, are less prevalent, but primarily right-libertarian ideas. Since Vance began making his first big bucks in Silicon Valley, tech billionaire Peter Thiel has been his mentor. Incidentally, he was one of Trump's most important supporters of 2016. Thiel, a right-libertarian, once wrote that he no longer believed that "freedom and democracy are compatible." Hardly anyone assumed he would put his freedom aside from now on.

In the past, Vance has occasionally cited blogger Curtis Yarvin, who once advocated for the US to be governed by a "national CEO" with the powers of a startup boss—something "called a dictator," Yarvin openly admitted. Should we be reminded of Trump, his ruling by decree, his disregard for the judiciary? Musk, who says he once voted for the Democrats, made the shift to right-libertarian ideology in 2022. On key points, it is certainly compatible with the AfD and other extreme right-wing parties in Europe.

Admittedly, something is shifting within the AfD. The strong Russia-friendly current within it, as Götz Kubitschek, one of the leading thinkers of the German far right, described it on New Year's Eve 2024, "feels alienated by the West, transatlantic paternalism, NATO, and the popular-ordinary cultural sovereignty of the hegemon." Musk, however, "with his mood-changing support" for the AfD, is strengthening "those parts" of the party "that share his agenda." "He is binding the party," Kubitschek concluded, "more closely to the USA." Above all, Musk is offering the AfD "de-demonization" and thus "relief." "In view of the hope for normalization," "concerns about the AfD's transatlantic ties are fading into the background." In the future, voices "that point to the destructive potential and behavior of the USA" or that "romanticize or work towards a rapprochement with Russia" will probably "find less of a hearing" in the AfD.

In short: The AfD is adopting a more transatlantic orientation – a development that, for example, the Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) under Giorgia Meloni has already undertaken, at least in its mainstream. The Trump-aligned US right is systematically working to ensure that this happens comprehensively on the European continent. This, incidentally, fits perfectly with the redefinition of the cordon sanitaire, or, as it is called today, the firewall. While it was once about drawing a clear line between anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, racist, and otherwise clearly definable right-wing groups, the cordon sanitaire was redefined in the EU's political sphere last year in order to counteract criticism of cooperation with Giorgia Meloni and her Fdi.

"The firewall" in the European Parliament runs "to the right of Meloni's party," a German politician declared in May 2024. This meant that any cooperation partners "must be pro-European, pro-NATO, pro-rule-of-law, and pro-Ukraine." Thus, the Trumpian US right and its cooperation partners on the European continent are consistently on this side of the firewall. The politician who formulated this new definition was Jens Spahn, a friend of Richard Grenell, a former Bannon fan, and a committed transatlanticist. But this may, of course, be a coincidence.